

COL. GEO. V. KUTHERFORD
(DEATHBED)

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The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

George V. Rutherford

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

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QUINCY MUSICAL PROTECTIVE UNION
LOCAL No. 285, A. F. M.
QUINCY, ILLINOIS
CLAYTON, SECRETARY

Washington, Saturday, April 15, 1865

Editor, Quincy Whig and Republican:

After a loss of 33 hours sleep (and an invalid at that), I attempt to give you a hastily written description, no, not a description, but to inform you of the facts connected with the most diabolical and truculent assassination known to the history of the world. My whereabouts since the occurrence will enable you to judge of the opportunity I had to affirm where of I speak.

It was announced in the daily papers on Friday that the President and Lt. General Grant, would be present at Ford's Theatre that evening, the anniversary of the surrender of Fort Sumpter and the evening of the day celebrated by the ceremony of re-raising the Stars and Stripes on that Fort. Mr Lincoln and General Grant had been formally invited and as nearly as I can ascertain, the invitation was accepted by some one in behalf of the President. Mr Speaker Colfax, who was present, informed me that the cabinet meeting of that day was protracted and unusually interesting, Mr Lincoln fully edifying them concerning his policy and plans. At the close of the meeting Mr Lincoln was applied to, to go to the theatre. He answered that he could not go, as he had an engagement, but it is too clear a fact that he was subsequently prevailed upon to go, as the sad results show. It was only in consequence of General Grant's departure from the city, rendering it impossible for him to accept the invitation and feeling that the public would be disappointed in not seeing either the President or the Lt. General as announced, that Mr Lincoln was induced to go.

(Here Rutherford gives a short description of the Theatre and the action that took place, but does not indicate that he was present.)

A few moments after the tragedy at the theatre I was running to the home of Supt. of Military Telegraphs, Major Eckart, in order to get him speedily at his post of duty for the great emergency. But a fleetier messenger than I had outstripped me; the Major had just been roused and was on his way. I then hastened to the residence of General Meigs, Quartermaster General, whose services I knew the Secretary of War would immediately require. I found that a messenger had also preceded me here and that he was about to start for the War Department. His family, knowing that the night was hideous and full of murder, entreated the General to put on his cloak to conceal his uniform, but he firmly replied: "I will not go in disguise."

We preceded together to the War Department, where the General received word from the Secretary of War to send a guard to his house, that he (the Secretary) had gone to Mr Seward's residence. General Meigs ordered the guard and directed me to assume command of the premises and to station the guards. Two companies of infantry and a detachment of cavalry were furnished and posted by me to guard the residence of the Honorable Secretary of War. It was thought very probably that the Secretary of War would be the next one assaulted as he had gone to Mr Seward's in his carriage unguarded. I remained in command until one A.M. when I was relieved by order of Major General Meigs and proceeded to join him at the house across from Ford's Theatre where the President was taken immediately after being assassinated.

The house is a small one but neatly arranged and was entirely thrown open by the proprietor, Mr. Peterson, to the use of the Secretary of War, who had in charge all matters pertaining to the President's case and attention. I arrived at half past one A.M. and found the street guarded at the intersection of E and F, with infantry and cavalry. On entering the house I found the bed on which the President lay surrounded by the members of the cabinet (except, of course Mr Seward), Senator Sumner, Speaker Colfax, Gov. Oglesby, Surgeon Gen. Barnes, Generals Halleck and Meigs and others, and the adjoining rooms filled with officers of various rank among whom was Major Eckart, issuing the important confidential orders of the Secretary of War for the apprehension of the assassins and by his never resting telegraph closing the roads leading from the city, near and far. In one of these rooms, Judge Carter was engaged in taking testimony concerning the affair at the theatre. In another room Mrs Lincoln accompanied by some of her lady friends was full of agony in view of the conditions of her husband, which the Surgeon General had long before pronounced utterly hopeless. The ball which was estimated to be one half inch in diameter entered a little to the rear of the left ear on the left side at the base of the posterior portion of the brain, passing through and lodging near the right eye and causing both to protrude to a considerable extent and to turn black in a very short time. The Surgeon General's finger could be introduced to its full length into the wound.

Mrs Lincoln would visit the room occasionally during the night, each time being conducted from thence almost overcome with grief. Mr Lincoln was wholly insensible from the time he was shot and did not suffer at all. I remained offering such assistance as I could until six A.M. when nearly exhausted I went home to take a little food to prepare me for further duty if called upon. I returned about ten minutes after Mr Lincoln had expired and suggested to General Augur, Commanding Department of Washington, the propriety of having the bells throughout the city tolled. He mentioned it to Mr Stanton and the order was given immediately. Mr Stanton directed me to procure and place coppers upon Mr Lincoln's eyes. I did so. It occurred to me that I had in my purse a silver half dollar presented to me by Brevet Major General B. H. Grierson as a keepsake. Had I lived to keep it forever I could not have had a more appropriate opportunity nor a more desirable use for it than the present thought suggested. I sent and obtained another one and placed the two upon Mr Lincoln's eyes in place of the coppers. The performance of so small a function in connection with so great a man, is an honor which cannot but be intensely gratifying to the doer.

At eight o'clock the room was cleared and the Honorable Secretary designated Colonel Pelouge of the War Department and myself to take charge of the body of President Lincoln until it was removed to the Presidential mansion. At about nine o'clock a plain box arrived, which was provided by direction of General D. H. Ruckre, Commanding Quartermaster of the Depot of Washington. Mr Lincoln was placed in it and taken to the President's house escorted by troops in charge of Gens. Augur, and Ruckre, Col. Pelouge and myself. It commenced to rain early in the morning and continued during the entire forenoon. The streets were damp with mud, but they presented no barriers to the sorrowing crowd which followed. On the way to the White House we were met by the Hon. Secretary of War, whose carriage was placed in the procession, and on arrival at the mansion the body was taken to the front room on the second floor.

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There was between the Chief Magistrate and his indefatigable Secretary of War, an attachment of peculiar tenacity. They were devoted friends. Until the moment I am about to mention, his important duties connected with the sudden and great Calamity, had absorbed his whole mind and attention. He had had no time to turn his thoughts inwardly, but after the box had been placed upon chairs in the room referred to, (the room was occupied by none but those in charge, and the undertaker and his assistants), Mr Stanton, after giving some directions, stepped forward, placed both hands upon the box, leaned forward, bent over, and wept as stout men do, when they weep at all. After a moment perhaps two, he slowly and solemnly stepped back and turned to leave the room, but great grief had depressed his eyes and furrowed his cheeks, for he had lost his friend.

The Secretary directed General Augur to have a general officer and another of lesser rank with the body all the time. General Augur and myself were continued in charge until twelve o'clock when we were relieved. I returned to my boarding house and have thus far progressed in narrating what I know in connection with this most lamentable tragedy. This city which has been during the week until Friday night, the scene of unparalleled rejoicing, now ears a changed and sombre aspect. Our rejoicings are mingled with tears. While we yet rejoice in the success of the great events connected with the death throes of rebellion, grieve at the fall of the man who adopted the measures midst our severest trials and prepared the nation and the world for the accomplishment, of this greatest end, the emancipation of mankind.

Very truly yours,

G. V. Rutherford

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George V. Rutherford

Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois, Bateman, Newton and Selby, Chicago, Munsell Pub. Co., 1901. p. 462.

George V. Rutherford was born at Rutland, Vt.; was first admitted to the bar, but afterwards took charge of the construction of telegraph lines in some of the southern states; at the beginning of the Civil War became Assistant Quartermaster-General of the State of Illinois, at Springfield, under ex-Gov. John Wood, but subsequently entered the Quartermaster's service of the General Government in Washington, retiring after the war with the rank of Brigadier-General. He then returned to Quincy, Ill., where he resided until 1872, when he engaged in manufacturing business at Northhampton, Mass., but finally removed to California for the benefit of his failing health. Died at St Helena, Calif., August 28, 1872.

(John Wood, res. Quincy)



Tri - State Civil War Round Table

Quincy, Illinois 920 Spring Street

August 26th

R. G. McMurtry
Lincoln National Life Insurance Co
Fort Wayne, Indiana

Dear Mr McMurtry:

Thank you very much for the print of the Lincoln death picture containing Col. Rutherford of Quincy. I finally found time to copy Rutherford's letter in the local newspaper and I am enclosing a copy for you. Outside of the fact that Rutherford became a rather well-to-do farmer after the war, here in Quincy, little is known about him. A check with the National Archives brought "more confusion!" There was a mix-up in the issuance of commissions to George V. and Friend S. Rutherford, the latter from Alton, altho his brother, Dr Reuben Rutherford did live in Quincy. Senator Orville Browning recommended Friend Rutherford for a commission, which was sent by mistake to George! Friend served as a Colonel also but with the 97th Illinois while George was under Quartermaster General Meigs in Washington. To further confuse the issue a footnote in the Browning diary states that Friend's brother, Reuben also served in the quartermaster department but of the state, and was breveted Brig. General. Well, so was George!!! Anyway, the letter does contain several interesting items that I had not seen before, and I hope you find it interesting too.

I have recommended to our program committee that they try to secure you for an address sometime in the future when you are available.

Very best wishes,

Carl Landrum

